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AUTHOR Hereford, Susan M.
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ABSTRACT

Questionnaires were returned by 814 graduate students at the University of Texas at Austin in response to a survey of their opinions and attitudes on the adequacy of academic advising procedures and the sources of information most commonly utilized when they need information on topics pertaining to their graduate work. The study was undertaken in order to provide constructive feedback to advisors and to obtain a general indication of graduate students' opinions throughout all colleges and schools within the university. The following findings were noted: (1) female graduate students tended to perceive more discrimination than male graduate students; (2) students working toward a master's degree tended to be less positively oriented in all areas except perceived discrimination than those working toward doctorates and those working toward master's degrees followed by doctorates; (3) students having multiple sources of university support for their study tended to react least favorably to their advisors, while those reporting no sources of university support reacted most favorably; and (4) students in graduate studies areas having multiple advisor systems tended to react more favorably on all scales except perceived discrimination than did students in programs having graduate advisors only. Tables detailing the data, and the survey of graduate student opinions and sources of information are appended. (Author/PHR)

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A SURVEY OF GRADUATE STUDENT OPINIONS AND SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Susan M. Hereford

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Measurement and Evaluation Center

Special Report

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A SURVEY OF GRADUATE STUDENT OPINIONS AND SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Susan M. Hereford

During the Spring Semester, 1974, the Graduate Student Council (GSC), supported by the Office of the Vice-President and Dean of Graduate Studies and with the technical assistance of the Measurement and Evaluation Center (MEC), initiated a project intended to obtain information regarding the following three topics:

1. Graduate students' attitudes toward the adequacy of academic advising procedures and their perceptions of the treatment of graduate students generally in their areas of advanced study;
2. Sources most commonly utilized by graduate students when they need information regarding topics pertaining to their academic work at the level of both their own graduate studies area and the Graduate School generally; and
3. Graduate students' opinions of the adequacy and accuracy of the advice and information they receive.

The major goals of the project were to provide constructive feedback to advisers in individual graduate studies areas and to obtain a general indication of graduate students' opinions throughout all colleges and schools within The University of Texas at Austin. The purpose of this report is to present information regarding the second of these goals; therefore, its contents consist of summary results based on all responses received without reference to specific graduate studies areas. With regard to the first goal of the project, it should be noted that results pertaining to each specific graduate studies area were distributed by MEC, along with explanatory information, to the appropriate graduate adviser in September, 1974.

Method

Representatives of the GSC prepared a first draft of a questionnaire to be used in the project, and the items were reformated and arranged into a three-section, 50-item instrument by the author of this report. A copy of the final version of the questionnaire has been included as an appendix.

The questionnaires and machine-scannable answer sheets were distributed by GSC representatives during the period of preregistration (April 29-May 2, 1974) for the Fall Semester, 1974. In most graduate studies areas, data were collected through the graduate advisers' offices; however, in a few cases, department offices, student meetings, or other mechanisms were utilized. The preregistration period was selected for data collection, since it seemed to be a logical time to obtain a reasonably large sample in an efficient and economically feasible manner. All GSC representatives returned completed answer sheets from their respective graduate studies areas to Frank J. Trogus, coordinator of the project for the GSC. The answer sheets were subsequently returned in early June, 1974, to MEC for processing. The answer sheets were prepared for scanning, and the data were then transferred to punched cards. Center research associate Carl E. Settles, assisted by MEC computer programmers and other data processing staff, performed the data analyses during the summer. A separate summary was run for each graduate area. As was stated previously, each graduate adviser received the computer-printed summary of the results for his/her area along with explanatory information. Each also received the answer sheets completed by students in his/her area, since some of these contained student comments. In addition to the area-specific summaries, several overall analyses of the data were performed. These will be described and reported in the next section.

Results

Responses to the questionnaire were received from 814 graduate students, representing 50 graduate studies areas. The percentages of respondents choosing the various alternatives for each of the items on the questionnaire are presented in Table 1, along with the number of students

replying to each item. The table also includes for each item a brief phrase describing its content.

In addition to simple distribution statistics, three subscales were created from the items in Section I of the questionnaire:

1. Reactions to the graduate adviser (items 5-10 and item 12);
2. Reactions to issues and procedures not necessarily related directly to the graduate adviser (items 13-19 and 24-26); and
3. Perceived discrimination on the basis of sex, ethnic group, or nationality (items 21-23).

Items were assigned to scales on the basis of a logical analysis of their content. In a subsequent item analysis, the three scales were found to have acceptably high levels of internal consistency. Alpha coefficients reflecting degree of internal consistency are included in Table 2.

Since students responded to each of the items on a five-point scale, scaling was reversed whenever necessary in order to assign a weight of five to the most favorable item response and a weight of one to the least favorable. Scale scores, therefore, were merely sums of weighted responses to the items comprising the various scales, and higher scores consistently reflect more positive responses. Table 2 presents summary data regarding the three scales, including for each the number of items, the maximum possible score, the mean score for the student sample, the percentage of possible favorability represented by the average, and an alpha coefficient of internal consistency.

One further series of analyses was performed in order to determine whether such variables as sex, degree(s) sought, source(s) of support for graduate study, and type of advising system differentially affected the favorability of student response to the subscales. Four one-way analyses of variance were performed using the scale scores, with the grouping variable in each being one of the four factors listed above (items 1-4 on the questionnaire). In terms of absolute magnitude of the differences between means, the obtained discrepancies, although statistically significant in some cases, were not extreme and should be regarded as trends. The following findings, however, were noted:

1. Female graduate students tended to perceive more discrimination (Scale 3) than male graduate students ($p < .01$).
2. Students working toward master's degrees tended to be less positively oriented in all areas except perceived discrimination (Scale 3) than did those working toward doctorates and those working toward master's degrees followed by doctorates ($p < .01$). In the area of perceived discrimination, the difference among the three groups did not approach statistical significance.
3. Students having multiple sources of University support for their graduate study tended to react least favorably to their graduate advisers, while those reporting no sources of University support reacted most favorably. Those reporting one source reacted in the middle range of favorability. It should be noted that all group means were in the positive range. No analogous differences were found between groups in terms of means on the other two scales.
4. Students in graduate studies areas having multiple adviser systems (i.e., graduate adviser and special program adviser) tended to react more favorably on all scales except perceived discrimination (Scale 3) than did students in programs having graduate advisers only.

Conclusions and Limitations

The strong general tendency among the graduate students included in this sample to perceive most aspects of their advanced study at The University of Texas at Austin quite positively is evident from the data presented in Tables 1 and 2. Even where differences between various subgroups were noted, the "low" group mean was always within the positive range. Students apparently feel a strong need for continuity in the advising process (i.e., same adviser from year to year). There may also be a need to make written descriptions of courses more accurate and available. A Graduate School level undertaking such as the recent "Of Course!", which appeared as a supplement to The Daily Texan during the week of April 14, 1975, might be a valuable project for the GSC to attempt.

Finally, several factors should be noted which limit the extent to which the data collected in this survey can be generalized:

1. Collection of data during the preregistration period systematically eliminated all graduate students who chose to wait until the regular registration period. The majority of these were probably more advanced graduate students.
2. Data collection procedures in the various graduate studies areas differed extensively. In some cases, completion of the questionnaire was mandatory, while in others, it was administered quite casually.
3. Feedback made it apparent that a substantial but indeterminable number of respondents were not certain to whom the title "graduate adviser" applied.

In future surveys, it is suggested that alternatives or supplements to data collection during preregistration be considered, although it seems that valuable but limited information can be collected efficiently in that period. It is further recommended that, regardless of when data are collected, a major effort be made to maximize standardization of procedures across graduate studies areas. The problem of student uncertainty as to the person to whom the term "graduate adviser" applies can easily be solved by writing the appropriate name on each answer sheet in advance of the survey.

APPENDIX

Survey of Graduate Student Opinions
and Sources of Information

Table 1

Percentages of Respondents Selecting Each Alternative on the "Survey of Graduate Student Opinions and Sources of Information"

I. General Information and Reactions to Program Advising Procedures

1. Sex: (A) male = 68% (B) female = 32%
2. Degree(s) sought: (A) master's = 31% (B) doctorate = 57% (C) master's to be followed by doctorate = 12%
3. Source(s) of University support, if any, for your graduate study: (A) fellowship or scholarship = 11%
   (B) teaching or academic assistantship or laboratory instructorship = 37% (C) research assistantship = 11%
   (D) fellowship or scholarship and teaching or research assistantship = 9% (E) none of the above = 32%
4. Which of the following best describes the system of advising used in your graduate studies area?:
   (A) graduate adviser only = 52% (B) graduate adviser and one or more special program advisers/counselors = 48%

*Questions	Definitely Yes	Yes	Uncertain	No	Definitely No	*Valid Cases
5. Adviser concern about student future	34%	37%	16%	10%	3%	n = 806
6. Candor of feedback from adviser	27%	44%	20%	6%	3%	n = 798
7. Accuracy of advice received from adviser	30%	48%	14%	7%	1%	n = 807
8. Adequacy of time for discussing schedule	30%	49%	10%	9%	2%	n = 805
9. Adequacy of adviser knowledge of field	45%	37%	11%	5%	2%	n = 806
10. Adviser knowledge of policy changes	35%	44%	15%	5%	1%	n = 804
11. Student need for adviser continuity	45%	34%	14%	6%	1%	n = 807
12. Helpfulness of relationship with adviser	29%	42%	16%	10%	3%	n = 808
13. Availability of adviser on regular basis	36%	51%	9%	4%	**	n = 808

*For questions and topics in full, see "Survey of Graduate Student Opinions and Sources of Information."

**Not a sufficient number to equal 1%.

*Possible number of valid cases is 814.

Table 1 (continued)

	*Questions	Definitely Yes	Yes	Uncertain	No	Definitely no	*Valid Cases
14.	Adviser aid in special interest areas	18%	33%	21%	23%	5%	n = 795
15.	Adequacy of referral ré special interest	27%	48%	22%	3%	**	n = 796
16.	Adequacy of advice on supporting work	16%	37%	31%	14%	2%	n = 792
17.	Aid in meaningful sequencing of work	14%	35%	29%	18%	4%	n = 783
18.	Student records kept up to date	27%	53%	17%	3%	**	n = 803
19.	Pressure to take courses not desired	9%	21%	9%	43%	18%	n = 801
20.	Preferential treatment of Ph.D. students	7%	17%	31%	34%	10%	n = 692
21.	Discrimination against ethnic minorities	4%	6%	21%	38%	31%	n = 799
22.	Discrimination against female students	4%	8%	16%	44%	28%	n = 804
23.	Discrimination against foreign students	1%	6%	24%	39%	30%	n = 799
24.	Requirements available in written form	25%	47%	12%	11%	6%	n = 807
25.	Availability of course lists for future	19%	51%	13%	13%	3%	n = 804
26.	Written course descriptions available	14%	32%	23%	24%	7%	n = 801

*For questions and topics in full, see "Survey of Graduate Student Opinions and Sources of Information."

**Not a sufficient number to equal 1%.

*Possible number of valid cases is 814.

II. Sources of Information

Sources

A. graduate adviser

B. department chairman or dean (if your college or school is not departmentalized)

C. graduate faculty members other than the graduate adviser, department chairman, or dean

D. fellow graduate students

E. office personnel in your graduate studies area (e.g., secretary to the graduate adviser, departmental administrative assistant, etc.)

*Topics	A	B	C	D	E	°Valid Cases
27. General rules, policies of U.T. Austin	34%	5%	7%	17%	37%	n = 753
28. General graduate school policies	57%	5%	9%	9%	20%	n = 757
29. Program area degree requirements	63%	6%	15%	7%	9%	n = 792
30. Nature, value of specific courses	21%	2%	29%	48%	**	n = 786
31. Financial aid	30%	15%	21%	10%	24%	n = 730
32. Departmental policies	28%	11%	14%	15%	32%	n = 772
33. Becoming involved in research	27%	3%	56%	14%	**	n = 774
34. Sources of research equipment	18%	5%	56%	13%	8%	n = 708
35. Supplies and equipment for teaching	9%	6%	34%	17%	34%	n = 639
36. Advice on effective teaching	11%	5%	55%	28%	2%	n = 615
37. Funding for student travel and research	30%	17%	33%	7%	13%	n = 701
38. Special advanced study programs	38%	14%	36%	6%	6%	n = 703

*For questions and topics in full, see "Survey of Graduate Student Opinions and Sources of Information."

**Not a sufficient number to equal 1%.

°Possible number of valid cases is 814.

Table 1 (continued)

III. Evaluation of Information

Response scale

A. almost always reliable

B. fairly reliable

C. occasionally unreliable

D. nearly always unreliable

E. not applicable (use only if you have never sought or received any information about a particular topic)

*Topics	A	B	C	D	E	°Valid Cases
39. General rules and policies U.T. Austin	40%	41%	15%	2%	2%	n = 751
40. General graduate school policies	42%	42%	13%	1%	2%	n = 755
41. Program area degree requirements	48%	37%	13%	2%	**	n = 756
42. Nature, value of specific courses	20%	49%	27%	3%	1%	n = 753
43. Financial aid	28%	38%	17%	5%	12%	n = 737
44. Departmental policies	30%	41%	17%	4%	8%	n = 731
45. Becoming involved in research	26%	43%	13%	3%	15%	n = 719
46. Sources of research equipment	21%	41%	10%	2%	26%	n = 677
47. Supplies and equipment for teaching	23%	38%	9%	2%	28%	n = 642
48. Advice on effective teaching	17%	38%	10%	2%	33%	n = 627
49. Funding for student travel and research	19%	33%	12%	4%	32%	n = 673
50. Special advanced study programs	19%	35%	10%	2%	34%	n = 667

*For questions and topics in full, see "Survey of Graduate Student Opinions and Sources of Information."

**Not a sufficient number to equal 1%.

°Possible number of valid cases is 814.

Table 2

Summary of Student Responses to Three Subscales Derived from the "Survey of Graduate Student Opinions and Sources of Information"

Scale Description	Number of Items	Maximum Scale Score	Average Scale Score	Average as Percent of Maximum	Alpha (interitem consistency)
1. Reactions to the graduate adviser	7	35	27.72	79.20%	.89
2. Reactions to issues and procedures not necessarily related directly to the graduate adviser	10	50	36.31	72.62%	.76
3. Perceived discrimination on the basis of sex, ethnic group, or nationality	3	15	11.58	77.20%	.81
General favorability (sum of three subscale scores)	20	100	75.62	75.62%	.88

SURVEY OF GRADUATE STUDENT OPINIONS AND SOURCES OF INFORMATION

The Graduate Student Council, supported by the Office of the Vice-President and Dean of Graduate Studies and with the assistance of the Measurement and Evaluation Center, is attempting to determine the attitudes of graduate students toward various aspects of their advanced study at the University of Texas at Austin. The major emphases of this study are the advising procedure and the availability and reliability of information regarding topics of concern to most graduate students.

Please take the time to respond thoughtfully to each item. Your individual responses and comments will be treated as confidential information. Do not write your name on the answer sheet.

IMPORTANT: (1) PLACE ALL RESPONSES AND COMMENTS ON THE SEPARATE ANSWER SHEET.
(2) USE A NUMBER 2 PENCIL.
(3) WRITE THE NAME OF YOUR DEPARTMENT OR GRADUATE STUDIES AREA IN THE SPACE LABELED "INSTRUCTOR'S NAME" IN THE UPPER LEFT CORNER OF THE ANSWER SHEET.

I. GENERAL INFORMATION AND REACTIONS TO PROGRAM ADVISING PROCEDURES

(Place all responses on the separate answer sheet.)

1. Sex: A. male B. female
2. Degree(s) sought: A. masters B. doctorate C. masters to be followed by doctorate
3. Source(s) of University support, if any, for your graduate study (indicate one category only):
   A. fellowship or scholarship B. teaching or academic assistantship or laboratory instructorship C. research assistantship
   D. fellowship or scholarship and teaching or research assistantship E. none of the above
4. Which of the following best describes the system of advising used in your graduate studies area?
   A. graduate adviser only B. graduate adviser and one or more special program advisers/counselors

For items 5 - 26, use the following response scale:

A = definitely yes
B = yes
C = uncertain
D = no
E = definitely no

5. Do you feel that your graduate adviser is seriously concerned about your future plans within the degree program?
6. Do you feel that the feedback you receive from your graduate adviser regarding your progress and plans is candid?
7. Have you generally found the advice received from your graduate adviser to be accurate?
8. Do you feel that your graduate adviser gives you adequate time to discuss your course schedule for a given semester?
9. Does your graduate adviser impress you as being generally knowledgeable in your discipline?
10. Does your graduate adviser keep up-to-date on changes in program rules, regulations and requirements?
11. Do you feel that there should be continuity in graduate advising (i.e., same adviser for a period of several years)?
12. Do you view your relationship with your graduate adviser as a positive, helpful one?
13. Is your graduate adviser or special program adviser available on a regular basis?
14. Does your graduate or program adviser make an effort to call your attention to available resources and sources of assistance which are pertinent to your own interests and specialization?
15. If you express an interest in pursuing a particular research topic or area, is your graduate or program adviser usually able to refer you to faculty numbers who work in that area or to helpful references?
16. Do you feel that you generally receive good advice on the choice of supporting work (i.e., courses outside your specialization area)?
17. Do you feel that you receive adequate advice for planning sequences of coursework which will contribute to the development of a thesis or dissertation topic?
18. As far as you know, are graduate student records kept up-to-date in your program?

19. Have you sometimes felt "pressured" into taking courses which you really did not want to take and which you did not need to take for academic reasons?
20. Do you feel that students in the doctoral program in your area are given preferential treatment over those in the masters program? (If your area has only a masters or only a doctoral program, please leave blank.)
21. In your opinion, are students from minority ethnic groups discriminated against in your program?
22. In your program, do you feel that there is discrimination against female graduate students?
23. Do you feel that foreign students are discriminated against in your program?
24. Are the specific basic requirements of your degree program available to you in written form?
25. Is a listing of courses to be offered in your program area during the subsequent semester generally available to you during the current semester?
26. Are accurate written descriptions of courses in your area available to supplement the material included in the catalogs?

II. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

The purpose of this section of the questionnaire is to determine the major sources consulted by graduate students when they need information about various aspects of their graduate work at the University of Texas at Austin.

Listed below are five categories of persons whom you may consult when you need information:

SOURCES

A. graduate adviser
B. department chairman or dean (if your college or school is not departmentalized)
C. graduate faculty members other than the graduate adviser, department chairman, or dean
D. fellow graduate students
E. office personnel in your graduate studies area (e.g., secretary to the graduate adviser, departmental administrative assistant, etc.)

Listed as items 27 - 38 are twelve important areas or topics about which most graduate students need information during their period of graduate study. For each area or topic listed, select from the five sources listed above the one which you would be most likely to consult if you needed information about that particular topic, and mark the letter corresponding to that source in the appropriate space on the separate answer sheet. Choose only one source for each topic. If, with regard to a particular topic, you would be most likely to consult a source other than any of the five listed, please leave the response space for that item blank.

REMEMBER TO SELECT ONE SOURCE FOR EACH TOPIC AND MARK THE LETTER CORRESPONDING TO THE SOURCE IN THE APPROPRIATE ITEM RESPONSE SPACE ON THE ANSWER SHEET.

TOPICS

27. general rules, polices, and regulations of the University of Texas at Austin
28. general requirements of the Graduate School
29. degree requirements in your program area
30. the nature and value of specific courses you are considering taking
31. financial aid
32. policies in your department (e.g., grievance procedures, application for assistantships, etc.)
33. strategies for becoming involved in research leading to thesis or dissertation
34. sources of equipment for research
35. sources of supplies and equipment for teaching if you were a teaching or academic assistant or laboratory instructor
36. advice for improving your teaching effectiveness if you were a teaching or academic assistant or laboratory instructor
37. sources of possible funding for support of student research and travel to professional meetings
38. special programs for advanced study (e.g., summer research, study abroad, post-doctoral work, etc.)

III EVALUATION OF INFORMATION

The purpose of this section of the questionnaire is to determine the accuracy and reliability of the information received by graduate students regarding the topics listed above regardless of the source from which the information or advice has been received.

Items 39 - 50 list the twelve topics again. Please evaluate the reliability of the information you have received regarding each. Use the following response scale, and indicate your ratings in the appropriate spaces on the separate answer sheet:

RESPONSE SCALE

A = almost always reliable
B = fairly reliable
C = occasionally unreliable
D = nearly always unreliable
E = not applicable (use only if you have never sought or received any information about a particular topic)

TOPICS

39. general rules, policies, and regulations of the University of Texas at Austin
40. general requirements of the Graduate School.
41. degree requirements in your program area
42. the nature and value of specific courses you are considering taking
43. financial aid
44. policies in your department (e.g., grievance procedures, application for assistantships, etc.)
45. strategies for becoming involved in research leading to thesis or dissertation
46. sources of equipment for research
47. sources of supplies and equipment for teaching if you were a teaching or academic assistant or laboratory instructor
48. advice for improving your teaching effectiveness if you were a teaching or academic assistant or laboratory instructor
49. sources of possible funding for support of student research and travel to professional meetings
50. special programs for advanced study (e.g., summer research, study abroad, post-doctoral work, etc.)

COMMENTS SECTION:

Please write any additional comments you may have in the blank space on your answer sheet. Feel free to make general and specific comments and recommendations regarding advising procedures in your graduate studies area, procedures for improved communication of important information, and other aspects of graduate study which you consider pertinent.

Thank you for your cooperation